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Message Text

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TO AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

S E C R E T STATE 164258

NODIS

FOLLOWING REPEAT BEIRUT 3360 ACTION SECSTATE 14 JUL 77

QUOTE

S E C R E T BEIRUT 3360

NODIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PGOV IS US
SUBJ: SOUTH LEBANON

REF: TEL AVIV 4995

1. WE ARE HEARTENED BY BEGIN'S REMARKS IN REFTEL REGARDING ISRAEL'S INTENTIONS VIS-A-VIS LEBANON AND I INFORMED FONMIN BOUTROS EVENING OF JULY 12 THAT WE HAD RECEIVED ASSURANCES FROM BEGIN HIMSELF THAT ISRAELIS HAD NO INTENTION ATTACKING OR OCCUPYING ANY PART OF LEBANON, UNLESS OF COURSE THERE
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DETERIORATION OF SITUATION IN SOUTH WHICH THREATENED ISRAELI SECURITY. HE SAID LATTER CAVEAT UNDERSTANDABLE (BOUTROS IS MEEKEST OF THE MEEK).

2. CERTAIN OF BEGIN'S REMARKS REQUIRE COMMENT, HOWEVER. FIRST OF ALL, WE DO NOT BELIEVE IT IS TRUE AS HE ALLEGES THAT SYRIAN ARTILLERY COULD "ALREADY" THREATEN TO KNOCK OUT

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HAIFA REFINERY, WHICH IS 31 KM. SOUTH OF BORDER AND 60 KM. SOUTH OF LITANI. SYRIAN 130 MM GUN HAS RANGE OF 27 KILOMETERS. IT IS LARGEST WEAPON THEY HAVE IN LEBANON AND THERE NONE SOUTH OF LITANI TO OUR KNOWLEDGE. ALTHOUGH NOT DEPLOYED IN LEBANON, SYRIAN ARMY INVENTORY INCLUDES 180 MM ARTY WITH RANGE OF 42 KILOMETERS, STILL WELL SHORT OF DISTANCE FROM LITANI TO HAIFA.

3. SECONDLY, ALTHOUGH IT APPEARS UNMISTAKEABLE THAT THERE HAS BEEN INCREASE IN ARMED PALESTINIAN PRESENCE SOUTH OF LITANI IN RECENT WEEKS, WE HAVE IMPRESSION THIS IS IN PART DEFENSIVE REACTION CAUSED BY BEGIN'S COMING TO POWER AND CONSEQUENT FEARS OF ISRAELI ATTACK. WE DO NOT MEAN TO DEPRECIATE ISRAELI CONCERN. WE TOO BELIEVE STEADY INFILTRATION OF ARMED MEN INTO SOUTH HAS WORRISOME IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE OF THAT AREA, WHICH IS BEING TURNED INTO PALESTINIAN-LEFTIST HOMELAND ON ISRAEL'S BORDER. ON OTHER HAND, PALESTINIANS HAVE NOWHERE ELSE TO GO, AND ISRAELI OPPOSITION TO SYRIAN PRESENCE IN SOUTH HAS ASSURED THEM ALMOST COMPLETE FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT IN MOST OF THAT AREA.

4. WE UNDERSTAND ISRAELI BELIEF THAT PALESTINIANS LESSER EVIL THAN SYRIANS, AND THIS MAY MAKE SHORT RUN SENSE. IN LONG RUN, HOWEVER, WE BELIEVE THEY ARE MISTAKEN AND WILL LIVE TO REGRET IT. SYRIANS ARE AT LEAST UNDER CONTROL OF SOVEREIGN GOVERNMENT INTERESTED
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IN PEACEFUL SETTLEMENT. PALESTINIANS UNDER NO ONE'S CONTROL, AND THEIR CAPACITY FOR EVENTUALLY CAUSING TROUBLE IS IMPRESSIVE.

5. TO RETURN TO SHORT RUN, HOWEVER, PALESTINIANS APPEAR TO HAVE NO PRESENT INTENTION RESUMING CROSS-BORDER OPERATIONS. NOT ONLY DO THEY SAY SO, BUT THEY APPEAR HAVE VERY REALISTIC APPRAISAL OF ISRAEL'S PUNITIVE CAPABILITIES IF THEY DO. THEY SEEM TO BE WAITING FOR SOMETHING TO TURN UP, WHILE IN MEANTIME TAKING DEFENSIVE MEASURES TO PROTECT THEMSELVES AGAINST: A) SYRIANS AND B) ISRAELIS AND CHRISTIANS. OF THE TWO, SYRIANS ARE MORE IMMEDIATE THREAT TO LEFTIST-PALESTINIAN REPUBLIC OF TYRE. ISRAELIS AND CHRISTIANS SEEM MORE IMMINENT THREAT IN BORDER REGIONS.

6. WE ESTIMATE CURRENT PALESTINIAN-LEFTIST ARMED STRENGTH BELOW DAMOUR AT SOMETHING BETWEEN 15 AND 20,000. THIS INCLUDES SAIQA, FATAH, REJECTIONISTS AND LEBANESE LEFTISTS. IN BORDER AREA FROM NABATIYAH TO ALMA ASH-SHAAB, WE ESTIMATE 4,000 TO 5,000. LARGEST SINGLE CONCENTRATIONS ARE AT SIDON AND TYRE. PALESTINIAN

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CAPABILITY TO MOUNT SUBSTANTIAL CROSS-BORDER OPERATIONS
SEVERELY LIMITED BY NATURE OF ISRAELI PRESENCE IN
BORDER AREA AND WE THINK IT UNLIKELY THEY WILL TRY ANYTHING.

7. AS A CHRISTIAN, I APPRECIATE BEGIN'S PREOCCUPATION
WITH PROTECTION OF CHRISTIAN MINORITY IN LEBANON. IT
WOULD BE TRAGIC WERE THAT MINORITY TO BE SUBMERGED.
REALISTIC CHANCES OF THAT HAPPENING SOON ARE, WE
SUBMIT, REMOTE. SITUATION HAS CHANGED DRASTICALLY IN
PAST YEAR AND, THANKS TO SYRIAN SUPPORT, IT IS
CHRISTIANS, NOT MOSLEMS, WHO HOLD MILITARY UPPER HAND
IN THIS COUNTRY TODAY. ISRAELI SUPPORT IS POTENTIALLY
VALUABLE PSYCHOLOGICAL WEAPON, BUT IT IS ALSO POTENTIAL
KISS OF DEATH AND PERFORMANCE OF ISRAELI-SUPPORTED
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CHRISTIAN FORCES IN SOUTH IS NOT HELPING CAUSE OF
CHRISTIANS IN NORTH. RATHER, IT IS SOWING HATRED.
BEGIN'S VIEW LOOKS A LITTLE MYOPIC TO US.

8. WE DO NOT KNOW WHICH CHRISTIANS ARE ASKING ISRAEL
TO SAY OPENLY THAT IT IS HELPING THEM. PERHAPS IT IS
THOSE WHO WERE VISITED BY GENERAL WEIZMANN. IN THAT CASE, WE
HOPE ISRAELIS HAVE MORE SOPHISTICATION THAN TO TAKE
THIS APPEAL FROM FRIGHTENED VILLAGERS AS LEGITIMIZATION
FOR CAMPAIGN OF INTERFERENCE. THEY ARE SMARTER THAN
THAT. AT LEAST THEY USED TO BE.
PARKER.
UNQUOTE VANCE.

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